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Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Michael Garofalo by Kevin Gatta

Michael Garofalo

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COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE Michael Garofalo

INTERVIEWER Kevin Gatta

DATE OF INTERVIEW 2/16/79

SUBJECTS COVERED

Account of his grandparents who are surviving

Three generations of business in the family

Marriage today and yesterday

Visit with grandmother

Society today

Young generation's ideas on tradition

Friendship

The new Federal Hill

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

MICHAEL GAROFALO JR.

DATE: FEBRUARY 16, 1979

PLACE: GAROFALO BARBER SALON

BY

KEVIN P. GATTA

INTERVIEWER: I am getting a haircut at Garofalo Barber Salon, on Federal Hill and talking to Michael Garofalo Jr., a 3rd generation Italian. If you hear buzzing or clippers in the background, it is because there is a lot going on today in the shop. Michael's father and grandfather were barbers before him. This is a family business, which began on Spruce Street on Federal Hill.

Let us begin. Michael, How do you feel about your grandparents and how close are you today compared to when you were younger. Do today's responsibilities make it difficult for you to see them?

INTERVIEWEE: My father's people live only a few minutes away from the shop, so I get to see my father's father about once a week. He used to come in to see how things were going and to tell his old stories of when he was starting out as a barber. Trying to establish a better life for his family in this country. He is so happy that I am a barber. He feels like I followed in his footsteps. He is 87 years old and is still concerned about my business. Very concerned. He believes in old traditions and feels that I should be married at 25 years old, settle down and have six children and everyday

we should have macaroni and meatballs on the table. He feels that it is disrespectful if I don't see him often. My mother's people, well my grandmother, took care of me a lot so a lot of her ways rubbed off on me. Her mannerisms and ways are instilled in my blood and at 24 years old I feel that I have a lot of my grandparents characteristics still in me. Its a concentration of the old and the new, her old ways and my ways.

My grandmother moved off Federal Hill about a year ago and she lives in Warwick now. I used to see her two or three times a week but now its more difficult to see her. She is satisfied with a phone call, and she's glad to know that I'm thinking of her.

When I see her I feel rejuvenated, feel young just by seeing her, by touching and kissing her and ofcourse eating too. She still wants to see me all the time. When she does see me its like I have to give a daily report of what I've been doing. She says I look thin, haven't I been eating? Then she starts taking out the food. (laughter)

Its tough to see her because of responsibilities that I have but I try to see her as often as I can. She says "Mike, you have to come over and eat, I'll tell Pauly and Rickey to come over and you can let me know when you can come." We will sit down and have a big meal and bring out the wine and chug-a-lug and really have a good time. When you leave

you feel so culturally motivated. I am half old and half new in my beliefs. I like the now days but I like my family traditions too. I wish everyone could enjoy this once in their lifetime. My friend, who is adopted, has no grandparents. He is half Italian but we seem to be from different cultures. He seems so lost. We just don't communicate on the same level, he has missed out on the customs and traditions. I feel kind of sorry.

It's a good feeling to know someone loves you, even more than a motherly love, its difficult to explain. I feel bad for people who never had grandparents, you really miss out on a lot if you never had the love of grandparents.

INTERVIEWER: Mike, how do you feel about marriage today?

INTERVIEWEE: As for marriage, the days then were so much harder that the old Italian culture and philosophy was: The children should get married so they can go out on their own and take a burden off of the family. That's how I think it was, because it was so strenuous then financially. Compared to today, there isn't that pressure to get married because people of today have so much. Marriage isn't the scapegoat like it was years ago. I heard that 50% of the marriages today end in divorce. I think the meaning of love has changed. It is not that true strong love like it was. It's to wide open today. The society is really causing everything to change. The lifestyle is different.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me more about your grandfather?

INTERVIEWEE: When I became a barber, my grandfather was so happy, he could

have won the lottery and not have been happier. Yesterday I went to the hospital to see him, and I asked him how he was doing, how he was feeling. The first thing he said was, "how are you doing, make sure you don't drink or smoke." But he loves his wine though, in moderation of course. Then he asks how is the business. Are you working hard he asks. There is a deep rooted feeling because he remembers his days as a barber through me. It makes him feel good that I am supporting myself by being a barber. Also it makes my father happy. The Italians compared to other nationalities have that deep rooted feeling in their children.

I think of my grandparents everyday. I wonder how they are feeling, how they are doing. I feel guilty not seeing them as often as I want to. I love them and they are old and you don't know how long they are going to be around. You wonder what you can do for them. You know there is something you could do but they rather you didn't. They may want you to deep down but they don't want you to go out of your way.

I remember years ago at Christmas or my birthday that they would give me money and I would say no and they would force me to take it. They always want to help give you money, what ever they can yet, they can't see you giving money to them. They always want to help. They say don't give that to me, you might need it.

I wish they could be around for ever, because my roots are in them. Society tends to reshape you a little and even more when your grandparents are gone.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about the new Federal Hill since renovation?

INTERVIEWEE: Any revitalization of a neighborhood is good. The parking here

is better and our business has gone up a little. The brick sidewalks, some old, some new, brings back a lot of the times I remember growing up. The small shops up here give you real personal touch. A lot of people come here to shop. Shopping is from generation to generation. I shop here because my parents did and still do. But if they didn't shop here I wouldn't. You tend to follow what your parents do. The small shop owners help you with your bags of groceries, they ask you how you like your meat to be cut. They ask how the meat was you bought last week, they tell you how to cook the meat and will give you recipes if you want them. These specialty shops cater to the older people, many still speak in Italian. The Italian people are very warm and loving people. They see each other, they embrace and kiss, very warm people. It's not a cold atmosphere. Even I kiss with my close friends, it's a bond of friendship. I don't kiss them on the lips, on the cheek. (laughter) Society may not accept this but I do. People may think what is wrong with him?, but these people are not Italian, they don't know our customs and traditions. People get the wrong idea. (laughter)

INTERVIEWER: A handshake is cold but close friends embrace.

INTERVIEWEE: I have noticed today, that a lot of my friends want to embrace and show warmth but then you think, can we embrace? They seem ashamed at first. Society today makes some people feel that they can't be close.

INTERVIEWER: So the younger generations are going back to the older traditions, they are proud to be Italian.

INTERVIEWEE: I notice more and more people today are old-fashioned. They will use that expression a lot. That proves it right there. We are so very proud of our heritage and you hear a lot of my generation saying I want an old-fashioned girl like my mother. Maybe not as far as looks, but..(laughter) The old ladies, they still have the braid in their hair, eat a lot, weigh 300 lbs. and smile with that gold tooth. Even today, when I tell my family about a girlfriend the first thing they say, "Is she Italian?" I say no but Ma, "well, maybe she will be OK if she can cook Italian food."

The kids are getting back to some of the old traditions. I am glad to see it, especially here up on the Hill.

Heritage is a shot in the arm, you can't beat the old ways.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you Michael.